

Heroes of Iwo Jima

Tales of heroism on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima are preserved in the handwritten notes of a regiment's dental officer

by Alice T. Clark & Robert D. Eldridge

It was a typical day at the Pacific War Memorial Association office in Honolulu, HI. The staff was opening mail and came across a large envelope. Inside was a 67-page handwritten and detailed narrative of the battle of Iwo Jima, written in the first person immediately after the battle. The author was LT Charles W. Hatch, USNR, a dentist attached to 28th Marines. Col Harry B. Liversedge's 28th Marines landed on the beaches closest to the forbidding Mount Suribachi on the morning of 19 February 1945. The battle for Iwo Jima follows in LT Hatch's own words.

We lived aboard [the USS *Tallegeda* (APA 208)] for some 45 days and it was livable but not like home. I guess you could say it was a typical troop ship. Following training and R&R [rest and relaxation], [we] set sail for Iwo Jima. We were shown maps of all sorts including a six-foot plastic scale model of the island. The things that we were told about the island were amazing in view of the fact that nobody had been allowed to visit Iwo for 50 years or more. But from the maps and the details of defense and terrain and garrison you would have thought that our intelligence had been operating an office there.

[On] the 18th of February there was considerable cleaning of rifles and pistols and loading of the same. I tried on all of the gear I intended to wear ashore and found I could still walk upright. I carried a hunting knife, first aid pouch, two filled canteens, and two .45 [caliber] magazines on my belt. A steel helmet, a .45 auto in a shoulder holster, and a .30 carbine were to be my protection. I carried a

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pack on my back with a poncho and some food and a camera. I had a case sling from my shoulders with emergency dental equipment, battle dressings and bandages, and a sulfa powder in it. A gas mask strapped to my right leg finished the load. The whole thing came to about 65 pounds or better I guess. Everyone turned in pretty early.

I slept amazingly well until about 0430 [on the 19th]. As it began to get light you could see the size of the force that had come to Iwo. Everywhere you looked there were ships, all kinds of ships. The battleships, cruisers, and destroyers were all throwing everything they had at the island. The transports and the smaller ships that carried equipment all seemed busy. The carriers were off a ways but their planes were in there pitching, too. The observation planes that spot targets and correct gunfire for the firing ships seemed to be suspended by wires over the island. They were fired upon by the [Japanese], but they stayed right there, slowly cruising up and down over the targets.

After a period of circling and getting all of the boats in our wave together we started for the line of departure. We got there after threading through a maze of ships. We passed rather close to a firing battleship and skirted around between it and the island. As it fired over our heads we were shaken in our boats and boots. As we circled

and waited for our signal it was like a ringside seat for a boxing match or a bullfight. We could see the planes come in and strafe and shoot rockets and bombs. Tanks were moving around on the hillside and you could see them fire at little dots that we knew [were] pillboxes. One of the observation planes from a battlewagon was shot down into the sea near us. It went into a tailspin over the island and fell quickly. No parachute came out of it.

[At about 1045 we crossed the line of departure.] I looked the men in the boat over again. They all had their equipment on and ready so I told them to get down low in the boat to take advantage of any cover the sides and bow of the boat could give. Moving up forward in the boat so I could check the ramp's release to make sure the ramp would drop as soon as we hit the beach, I found myself wondering what we would see when the boat grated on the sand and the front of the boat fell away. About half way in I looked up over the edge of the side to see the beach. It didn't look so steep, but it appeared very crowded at the waters edge. Up on the first terrace a caterpillar tractor moved along. Off to our left toward the mountain a shell burst in the water and I wondered if it could reach us. I was scared. It seemed hard to breathe and I know my heart was going at least 125. My legs felt weak and all of the gear on my back and belt seemed heavy. Well my chances

were as good as anyone else's and better than a lot.

[When we hit the beach, we found that the] loose sandy gravel was really murder. When you tried to run from one shell hole to another for cover, just

As far as being scared I think the night of D+1 [20 February] was the worst for me. I really shook. It was cold that night and I think there was a Japanese artillery gun somewhere that had our range. Every time one would whistle in and hit it would start me to shiver-

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a few yards made you winded. At the top of the first terrace I came pretty close to getting [killed]. I had flopped against a sand bank to look up over the terrace to pick my next spot to jump to. There was a pretty deep shell hole about 20 yards away. Just as I had decided to take off for it a mortar shell came in behind me. It was really deafening. It slid me forward a few inches and bobbed my feet up off the ground. I didn't feel them lift but I did feel them hit the ground. I didn't know if I was hit or not. My feet felt numb and it was with little doubt that I looked back at them. The sand was a greenish yellow right up to my feet. I later learned this was the high explosive picric acid charge from the mortar shells. [I figured that I'd] never walk away from a closer one than that as I jumped for the shell hole up the hill. My feet were still numb like they were asleep but why that thing didn't tear me up with shrapnel I'll never know. The soft sand and the angle of the beach was all that saved me. A couple of jumps later I landed in a shallow ditch along the flat of the second terrace. There was a kid from the second battalion there, whom I recognized as an old patient. He grinned as I gasped for breath. 'Is that all dental gear, Doc?' 'Hell no, most of it's battle dressings.' [We] would need them up there—a lot of men were getting hit. There were dead Marines all over the beach.

ing. Just when I got the teeth stopped chattering another would come in and I was off like a dog passing a bone. Toward early morning I think Naval gunfire knocked out that Japanese piece because it didn't bother us any more. During the night we knew the rounds were coming in close. The ground shook when they hit. One round hit right in the trench in front of our foxhole. We had dug into the side of the trench and piled the sand up in front of the hole in the trench. To prevent the sand from sliding, we had thrown a poncho over that hump of sand. When we got out of the hole in the morning that poncho was riddled with shrapnel. We were sure thankful we had a good foxhole.

During that night we had treated two patients. We had dug a couple of extra holes along the trench for just such an emergency. Both of the men had been severely wounded. Each got plasma but one was dead in the morning. We had to use a flashlight to find the vein on the arms to give them plasma. I held the light and covered [them] with a blanket but we could not shield all of the light. We expected a sniper to cut loose but apparently the artillery was keeping them down. The boy who died had a bad abdominal wound and didn't have a chance to start with.

The morning of D+4 [23 February] was a wonderful day. We knew that the base of the mountain had been taken and also that a patrol was starting up the mountain. At 1030 we saw the flag go up on the top of [Mount] Suribachi and the southern tip of the island was secured. The 28th Marines had landed and accomplished their mission! The casualties had been high and the outfit was pretty well shot up.

Each page of LT Hatch's diary is filled with great detail. The Pacific War Memorial Association is in the process of placing the entire 67-page manuscript on its association web site at www.pacificwarmemorial.org. We invite the reader to take a look at the site. As an historical aside, LT Hatch, who passed away in August 2004, lived to be 86. He was a lifelong friend of CDR Lewayne Thompson, USN(Ret), who sent us the manuscript, and MajGen Fred Haynes, USMC(Ret); both were Iwo veterans.

USMC



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